

SIERRA COUNTY

Department of Public Works and Transportation

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February 19, 2003

Tim H. Beals
Director

Honorable Members
California Transportation Commission
1120 N Street (MS-52)
Sacramento, CA 95814

ATTN: Mr. R. Kirk Lindsey, Chairman

Dear Members of the Commission:

Thank you for your support and that of the California Transportation Commission shown in programming STIP projects of importance to Sierra County. As a result, Sierra County has been able to deliver projects that significantly improve connectivity and mobility to benefit not only local residents, but the millions of visitor days as well - accessing Sierra County's recreational resources, while at the same time improving the local economy.

A delegation from Sierra County, including members of Sierra County Transportation Commission, Sierra County Board of Supervisors and staff traveled to Sacramento on February 11, 2003 to meet with Mr. David Brewer and Ms. Kathie Jacobs who, as you know, are staff to California Transportation Commission. The purpose of the meeting was to urge CTC to take action at its February, 2003 meeting to approve Sierra County's allocation requests in order that its STIP projects may proceed without loss of the 2003 construction season. Upon hearing Sierra County's plea, CTC staff recommended that our request be directed to the Commission itself, since the issues involve policy, rather than statutory matters. Therefore, we respectfully request that we be given an appointment to meet with you at your convenience to further discuss the matters contained in this letter.

As we stated in our appeal to you at the CTC meeting in October, 2002 meeting, roadways are the life-blood of the economy of remote Sierra County. Over the past twenty years, the Sierra County economy has become more reliant on tourism as logging and mining have been legislated nearly out of existence. The closure in 2000 of the Sierra Pacific Mill, the last major industry in Sierra County, caused the county's tax base to suffer a substantial and continued loss. Efforts are currently underway to convert the mill property to a business park as a means of encouraging job creation, but the continued funding of needed transportation projects is vital to support this effort.

STIP programming strategies in Sierra County have effectively delivered all/or significant phases of the following projects:

- Rehabilitation of local streets and roads in all major Sierra County communities and the City of Loyalton;
- Rehabilitation of Heriot Lane – a major connector route between Sierra and Plumas Counties;
- Construction of Downieville Interpretive Center and Sierra City Visitor Center – both facilities for the benefit of the traveling public;
- Three HBRRP bridge rehabilitation or replacement projects that have now completed all environmental hurdles and are ready to proceed with right-of-way acquisition and construction (Pearl Street Bridge; Sierra Buttes Road Bridge; Goodyears Creek Bridge).

At the time of the 2002 STIP capacity crisis in May, 2002, Sierra County endeavored to cooperate with CTC by leaving \$2.1 million of its RIP funds in unprogrammed reserves in June, 2002. As of the November 2002 CTC meeting, a total of \$3.1 million remain in Sierra County's unprogrammed reserves after the programming by your Commission in October, 2002 of four more Sierra County HBRRP bridge projects with STIP funds used for local match. In accordance with your Commission's recommendations, Sierra County re-prioritized its roadway projects and cut four of the six roadway projects it requested in August. The two remaining public safety related local roadway projects requested for programming were denied in October. At that time your Commission gave assurance that it would program those projects as soon as any other statewide STIP projects slip and the comparatively minimal amounts needed for these locally important local road projects becomes available.

Sierra County is one of the most rural and remote regions in California and serves as a major connector to California's northeastern counties. Sierra County is a "Tahoe Gateway County". The state and local roads within Sierra County are highly utilized as regional connector routes to major recreation areas both within the county itself and to those in adjoining counties. Additionally, Sierra County's streets and highways serve as connector routes to job centers in northern California and Nevada.

The current State budget crisis, compounding upon an overestimate in the State Highway Account (SHA) threatens progress toward completion of Sierra County's originally programmed HBRRP projects. Allocation requests currently pending CTC approval require prompt funding to keep the projects moving to completion. Environmental clearance has been obtained for these three bridge projects, and the shelf life of such clearance is limited. Each of these bridges is either functionally obsolete or structurally deficient and has significant safety issues that will be addressed by the replacement structures.

The Sierra Buttes Road Bridge (PPNO 1L28) is of particular concern as it consists of a rail car frame with timber deck supported by piled rubble rock abutments. Funding allocations were requested at your December 2002 meeting for right-of-way (supplemental allocation of \$4,000) and construction phases. Based on details recently worked out with Caltrans District 3 Local

Assistance right-of-way support staff, the County is now able to drop its supplemental allocation request for R/W, and will only need to ask for allocation of programmed right-of-way and construction funds. In order to meet construction season weather constraints in Sierra County, it is essential that the allocations be approved as quickly as possible.

CEQA/NEPA environmental clearance for the Goodyears Creek Road Bridge (PPNO 1L27) has been obtained and a land-swap is in process with the U.S.D.A. Forest Service to obtain the necessary right-of-way. It will take approximately 60 days to complete the PS&E phase including all contract documents to ready this HBRR Project to advertise for construction. If the requested funding allocations are approved at the February CTC meeting, it should be possible to have the construction of the new bridge substantially completed during calendar year 2003.

Sierra County plans to have the Pearl Street Bridge (PPNO 1L29) project ready for advertising in the fall of 2003. This would give the contractor the necessary lead-time to have the steel rolled and the main span fabricated so that the bridge can be constructed in 2004. The Pearl Street Bridge serves as the only alternative to the single lane State highway bridge on SR 49 in Downieville. The Pearl Street Bridge is a narrow single-lane bridge with a sharp right-angle curve at the east end that is difficult for larger vehicles, including the community's fire trucks. The replacement structure, while it remains a single-lane bridge, will be wider in order to improve pedestrian safety and will be slightly realigned to allow for larger "SU" vehicles to more easily use the bridge. In addition, the existing bridge, while able to carry vertical loads, has limited resistance to lateral movement. This makes the bridge subject to possible catastrophic collapse during a seismic event or should an errant vehicle impact the structure.

Through use of STIP funding, Sierra County is in the process of developing long-needed visitor centers to provide facilities for benefit of the traveling public on State routes throughout the county. Prior to commencement of the County's program, there were no such visitor centers convenient to motorists and other traveling public on State Routes 49 or 89 in Sierra County. The first of these facilities, the Downieville Interpretive Center has been constructed and is near completion. Sierra County Board of Supervisors has authorized the Sierra City Visitor Center for advertising for construction bids. Funds programmed for this project are programmed and an allocation request is pending before your Commission. Although every effort has been made to limit construction costs, it is anticipated that a supplemental allocation of approximately \$130,000 will be required to fully fund the project. Costs have risen due to features incorporated into the project to meet community concerns and better serve the traveling public. Construction cost overruns for the Downieville Interpretive Center are due to unanticipated discoveries during excavation that required the relocation of utilities, and required a major change in on-site sewage system design and leach field placement, and supplemental allocation requests cover these costs. Supplemental allocations have been requested for the construction phases for both projects. This situation is critical and places Sierra County in a dire position if the supplemental allocation is not approved.

Sierra County has PA&ED allocated in FY 2002/2003 for three HBRR bridge rehabilitation-replacement projects using STIP funds as local match. All three projects received proposals for completion of PA&ED that came in over-budget, and no contracts have been awarded. Additionally, the construction phase of the Heriot Lane Rehabilitation Project was completed with a savings of programmed allocations in excess of \$200,000 due to lower than anticipated asphalt concrete prices. It had been hoped that in order to keep the projects that are ready for construction on schedule, CTC could approve an exception to CTC policy not to allow currently allocated funds to be exchanged for needed supplemental allocations. However, CTC staff explained that statutory requirements do not allow CTC to take such actions. Therefore, Sierra County Transportation Commission understands that its supplemental allocation requests must be funded from unprogrammed reserves, but this point is stressed to affirm Sierra County's commitment to good project management and protection of public funds.

Sierra County Transportation Commission urges that CTC take action to approve Sierra County's supplemental allocation requests totaling \$196,000 from its \$3.189 million in unprogrammed reserves in order that projects currently ready for construction can meet the 2003 Sierra seasonal construction window. It should be noted that in actuality such action will cause no change in cash flow potential due to savings on the Heriot Lane project and the decision not to proceed with the three bridge projects that bid over the cost in the project study reports. Sierra County Transportation Commission has made every attempt to follow the Commission's directions since passage of SB45. In good faith Sierra County programmed its STIP funds with the understanding that supplemental allocations would be available from the unprogrammed reserves it judiciously retained to be used against future increased project costs. Without approval of the supplemental allocations requested, Sierra County's general fund will be severely impacted. Sierra County has been diligent in project delivery, and since we do not have unallocated projects in the current year, we do not have funds to trade out for the minimal requested supplemental allocations so desperately needed.

The considerable positive economic impact to Sierra County of active construction projects must not be overlooked. Construction activities inject dollars into the County's depressed economy. Benefactors from this construction spending include construction workers, materials vendors, restaurants, motels and other support businesses making up the local economy. As a small county hit by mill and mine shutdowns, the loss of any positive economic activity is devastating.

The planning, programming and monitoring (PPM) allocation request before your Commission is critical to effective project implementation. Sierra County has very limited resources, and must rely heavily upon its PPM funds to administer and manage its STIP projects. The transportation infrastructure in Sierra County benefits a wide range of traveling public, and current and future economic development in Sierra County is closely tied to allocations for completion of the projects discussed in this letter.

Dollar for dollar, the comparatively minimal amounts requested by Sierra County are critically important to public safety, commerce, economic development, and the movement of people and goods in and through the county. When compared to high priced projects that take much longer

to construct and complete, project delivery in Sierra County immediately benefits a broad spectrum of California's traveling public, as well as the regional and statewide economy. These urgently needed allocations by the CTC involve comparatively minor amounts of funding, and would allow Sierra County to proceed with projects in the 2003 construction Sierra mountain region construction window. Environmental documents are completed and approved. Sierra County has made every effort possible to work with the CTC and Caltrans to follow procedures and keep its programmed projects timely. Sierra County Transportation Commission elected to keep a reasonable amount of its available funding in unprogrammed reserves in order to be able to program future projects in a realistic, accountable and responsible manner and to keep funding available for supplemental allocations as needed. More than half of Sierra County's current STIP will remain in unprogrammed reserves – allowing access to it by the State.

The funding in Sierra County's current allocation requests is critically needed to maintain development of these projects that are already underway and of crucial and strategic importance to the local economy. Delay of the requested allocations would cause layoffs that would result in a melt-down of the already depressed local economy. The actions requested in this letter are critical to Sierra County's current public safety, economic development, local commerce and transportation infrastructure.

Therefore, Sierra County Transportation Commission strongly urges California Transportation Commission to take action at its February 2003 meeting to approve Sierra County allocations. This action would retain \$3 million in Sierra County's unprogrammed reserve available to the State for utilization during this current funding crisis.

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions. We will greatly appreciate your positive response to our requests.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

SIERRA COUNTY
TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION



Tim H. Beals
Executive Director

Cc: Members, Sierra County Transportation Commission
Members, Sierra County Board of Supervisors
Mr. David Brewer
Ms Kathie Jacobs
Mr. Chad Baker
Mr. Ben Bramer